

# The Police Chief

THE PROFESSIONAL VOICE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

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## Inside:

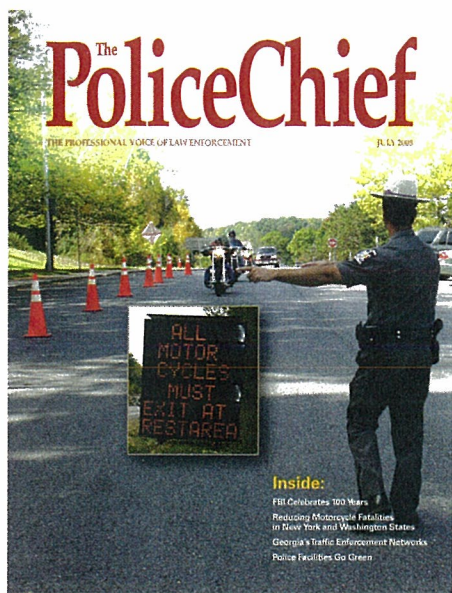
FBI Celebrates 100 Years

Reducing Motorcycle Fatalities  
in New York and Washington States

Georgia's Traffic Enforcement Networks

Police Facilities Go Green





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Charles E. Higginbotham/Editor

Benjamin P. Keller/Assistant Editor

Margaret M. White/Proofreader

B. J. Hendrickson/Advertising Coordinator

Christian D. Faulkner and

Mara Johnston/Member Services

TGD Communications, Alexandria, Virginia/  
Graphic Design and Production

Richard J. Ashton, Patricia Casstevens,

Carolyn Cockcroft, Beth Currier,

Elaine Deck, John Firman,

Jack Grant, Kim Kohlhepp,

Nancy Kolb, Phil Lynn,

Jerry Needle, Paul Santiago,

Vincent Talucci, Nancy Turner,

Gene Voegtlin/Editorial Advisors

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After impressive reductions in total traffic fatalities in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the traffic fatality trend for the past decade has remained relatively unchanged in the United States. At the same time, however, motorcycle fatalities have increased at an alarming rate. State police in Washington and New York, however, are finding new ways to combat this increasing problem. The diverse strategies these agencies are implementing reflect the complex nature of the problem they face. Photos courtesy of the New York State Police.

# The Police Chief

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# Nighttime Seat Belt Enforcement in Washington State

By Brian A. Ursino, Assistant Chief, Washington State Patrol, Olympia, Washington; and  
Jonna VanDyk, Program Manager, Washington Traffic Safety Commission, Olympia, Washington

The state of Washington has consistently been a national leader in seat belt use, particularly since 2002, when it became a primary enforcement state and began participating in the “Click It or Ticket” (CIOT) public information and enforcement project. It took Washington only five years to reach one of the highest seat belt use rates in the country, at 96.3 percent.

Four years of Washington crash data (2002–2005) showed that 38 percent of all motor vehicle occupants killed were not wearing their seat belts. This realization sparked many questions, and as data were analyzed, the following answers emerged:

- In Washington State, about the same number of traffic deaths occurred during the daytime hours as at night, even though traffic volumes at night were only 12 to 15 percent of what they were during the day.
- The fatality rate at night was approximately four times higher than that during the day.
- The official surveys used in determining a state’s usage rate were conducted during daylight hours.
- National survey research showed that seat belt use is typically six to eight percentage points lower at night than during the day.

In response to the last point, the Washington Traffic Safety Commission (WTSC) conducted daytime and nighttime seat belt use surveys in October 2006. Its findings were similar to the national survey research: nighttime seat belt use was five percentage points lower than during the day; the difference was even higher on Saturdays, when nighttime seat belt use was nine percentage points lower than during the day.

## Difficulty of Nighttime Enforcement

Confronted with these data, Washington’s traffic safety leaders were faced with a choice: continue daytime patrols during

CIOT emphasis periods to focus on the final 4 percent of noncompliant vehicle occupants or shift CIOT operations to the nighttime hours, when use rates were lower and the nonbelted fatality rate was four times higher. If the decision were to be based on data alone, the answer would seem simple. However, taking operational considerations into account, moving CIOT operations to nighttime hours would prove to be a challenging undertaking.

Despite the challenges, the data demanded that effective nighttime seat belt emphasis patrols at least be attempted in a few locations, that the Washington State Patrol (WSP) learn from those experiences, and that any successes be replicated.

## WSP Pilot Program

In late 2005, the WSP developed an operational plan to conduct a nighttime seat belt emphasis patrol to be executed in November of that year in the Vancouver area (southwest Washington). The plan centered on a stationary, out-of-car visual observation strategy while placing a premium on ensuring officer safety. The basic part of the strategy consists of an observing officer standing in a well-lit area. Whenever an unbuckled motorist is seen, the officer radios to a strategically parked contact officer, who then makes the stop. For this reason, nighttime seat belt patrols require the work of several officers.

The results of the first patrol were impressive. In just a four-hour period (6–10 p.m.) on a Wednesday, one WSP sergeant (acting as the observer) and four WSP troopers (in chase cars) generated the following activity:

- Forty-one total contacts
- Twenty-nine seat belt violations
- One DUI arrest
- Six drug arrests
- Two warrant arrests (one felony, one misdemeanor)
- Five arrests for driving with a suspended license

- Six uninsured-motorist infractions
- Two stolen vehicles recovered

## National Demonstration Project

Once the pilot program was completed, the WSP provided the after-action report to the WTSC director and the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) regional administrator in Seattle. Based on the WSP experience, the WTSC submitted a proposal to the NHTSA, asserting the following:

- High-risk drivers fail to buckle up at night.
- Drivers at greatest risk of serious crashes also tend to be those who use seat belts less often.
- There is greater likelihood of social deviance by those who do not wear seat belts—for example, outstanding arrest warrants, drug possession, driving with suspended/revoked licenses, or driving while impaired.
- There is a greater prevalence of other criminal behavior by those who do not wear seat belts.

As a result of the proposal, the WTSC received special federal funding for a demonstration project to organize and evaluate nighttime seat belt enforcement (NTSBE) patrols. The purpose of the project was to improve nighttime seat belt use, thereby reducing traffic deaths and injuries. NTSBE patrols have been funded with CIOT overtime grants and publicized with earned media and advertising (see figure 1). Between these large-scale enforcement campaigns, the WTSC funds smaller NTSBE projects supported by earned media publicity.

The demonstration project, as it was originally conceived, sought to involve three large-scale statewide CIOT style mobilizations: May 2007, October 2007, and May 2008. Research was conducted before and after each mobilization to identify any change in seat belt use behavior





Figure 1. Screenshot of one of the television commercials run during the CIOT emphasis periods

and to track project results. A research firm working under an NHTSA contract is conducting the evaluation and is expected to report in December 2008.

### Making the Demonstration Project Operational Statewide

Since Washington law enforcement agencies began participating in CIOT emphasis patrols in 2002, they had all been based on the daytime, roving patrol strategy. Therefore, the WTSC staff anticipated skepticism and prepared an informational overview and training component that was then delivered to law enforcement agencies on a regional basis so that agencies

would buy into the nighttime strategy and to ensure that they would apply for nighttime CIOT grants when they were made available.

### Preliminary Results

The first statewide nighttime seat belt emphasis effort took place in May 2007, with the participation of 75 police and sheriff's agencies, including the WSP. This effort involved 358 patrols in 358 different locations, and each patrol consisted of an average of three officers. Those patrols intercepted the following:

- A total of 706 reckless, aggressive, or unlicensed drivers
- A total of 325 drivers who were either impaired by alcohol or other drugs or arrested for a drug or alcohol violation
- A total of 182 drivers who were arrested for criminal behavior (felony arrests, warrants, or other criminal citations)
- Eight stolen cars
- Fully 4,671 drivers or passengers who were unbuckled, including children

Officers were surprised at the number of drivers who were cited for having unbuckled children in their cars, but research shows that people who buckle up are more likely to make their children buckle up. The corollary to this tendency is that people who fail to buckle up tend to let their children ride unbuckled, too.

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